

Arrested Development: Revising Remediation at John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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*ABSTRACT: Basic writing has played a large role in the history and institutional identity of the City University of New York (CUNY). From the Open Admissions era of Mina Shaughnessy to the present day, “remedial courses” at CUNY have been revised in response to different colleges’ missions, curricular initiatives, university policies, and public opinion. Briefly reviewing a short history of remediation at CUNY and the university policies which affected it, this article then describes an intensive developmental writing course newly implemented at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. It explains the course’s strategies, rationalizes its approach, and examines its successes as well as its continuing challenges. Theoretically approaching the basic writing course from the combined perspectives of Mary Louise Pratt and Lev Vygotsky (“the contact zone of proximal development”), this newly revised course takes seriously what Mike Rose says when he suggests “that a remedial writing curriculum must fit into the overall context of a university education.” In a pedagogical situation where a gatekeeping exam (over)determines students’ educational progress, this course goes beyond skills and drills or test-taking preparation to challenge students’ critical thinking and develop their college-level writing abilities. It gives students and instructors a curriculum that does not teach **to** the test but, instead, **with** it.*

KEYWORDS: developmental writing, remediation, curriculum design, testing

Nearly thirty years ago in the worn urban classrooms of The City College of New York, Mina Shaughnessy recollected about the first essays she read from Open Admissions students, saying:

But the writing was so stunningly unskilled that I could not begin to define the task nor even sort out the difficulties. I could only sit there, reading and re-reading the alien papers, wondering what had gone wrong and trying to understand what I at this eleventh hour of my students’ academic lives could do about it. (*Errors and Expectations* Preface)

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I particularly like her metaphor of “alien papers”; it alludes to how language has been abducted, prodded, probed, and then returned to Earth, altered and barely recognizable. Luckily for her students and subsequently for all of us, her close study of their unidentified writing objects has left us more receptive to students’ alien papers. Shaughnessy and compositionists who have followed her have considered why students’ writing seems to have so much interplanetary interference, and discovered how to introduce entering students to our equally strange academic universe. In “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae suggests why student writing often appears so odd, stating, “The [student] writer has located himself [. . .] in a context that is, finally, beyond him, not his own and not available to his immediate procedures for inventing and arranging text” (514). If Shaughnessy identified the papers as alien, Bartholomae recognizes how the academic community can alienate students, baffling and sometimes intimidating them into silence. Both Shaughnessy and Bartholomae enlighten us about the other-worldly culture of college-level writing, and how students with our assistance can meet the specialized demands and expectations of college composition.

I am also struck by Shaughnessy’s apprehension about the “eleventh hour of [her] students’ academic lives.” She questioned what she and her colleagues could do in a fifteen-week semester that would resolve their deeply ingrained writing interferences. After analyzing thousands of placement tests, she categorized students into three categories: those who “met the traditional requirement for college work,” those who had “learned to get by but who seemed to have found no fun nor challenge in academic tasks,” and “those who had been left so far behind the others in their formal education that they appeared to have little chance of catching up” (2). Although her taxonomy of student writers may be reductive, what I find resonant is that it remains tangible and recognizable in my own students’ writing today. I’m still asking, “What curricular program and pedagogical strategies can be the catalyst to accelerate students’ literacy acquisition, especially in the short timeframe of a semester?” Simply, how can I help them “catch up”?

In 1970, the City University of New York began its policy of Open Admissions, ensuring that any student graduating with a high school diploma could enroll in one of its degree-granting colleges for what was then a free university education. This grand educational experiment began with minimal systemic or pedagogical forethought or planning on the part of the University, and during those first years of Open Admissions, writing program administrators were making seat-of-their-pants decisions about

the programming of composition courses. Many of the troubleshooting decisions in those days were made to meet the needs of the incoming, underprepared student body; however, the students were not the only exigent factor. Many programmatic decisions were made in response to the voices of threatened faculty, opposing public opinion, and limited financial funding. In accommodating the specific needs of this new student body, the writing programs—specifically basic writing (“remedial”) programs—were redefining the identity of colleges as well as the nature of college education (see Soliday). In *Changing Our Minds: Negotiating English and Literacy*, Miles Myers asserts that students’ literacy abilities are not just a product of the students’ aptitude for learning nor the gifts of teachers to convey the elements of reading, writing, and critical thinking but are also affected by the external pressures of institutional policy decisions which are even more broadly shaped by a culture’s value of literacy abilities. His perspective can be no better exemplified than through the ongoing history of writing programming and instruction at CUNY. Policies on literacy are constantly amended, and media coverage, normally negative, is unending (see McCormack¹). If as argued by Myers, writing programs are responding to both student need and external policy pressures simultaneously, writing program administrators must consider how the two sides of this complex equation must be considered, recalculated, and carefully resolved.

A lot has changed at CUNY since Shaughnessy’s era, and new policies have had a forceful impact on both composition curricula and writing program structures. In May 1998, driven by the clamor of publicized opinion, the CUNY Board of Trustees voted to eliminate remediation at all of its senior colleges, which meant that any entering student who could not pass the University’s entrance literacy exams would be diverted to its comprehensive colleges (offering Associate’s, Bachelor’s and, sometimes, Master’s degrees) or community colleges (offering only Associate’s degrees). Having altered the very basis of Open Admissions access, this politically motivated decision brought on a firestorm of protests, debates, and rancorous board meetings (see McCormack 1-20). Accompanying this bureaucratic decision, other policies began to shift: admissions criteria were amended, increasing tuition costs incurred, and University policies around student literacy (and numeracy) were revisited and reconsidered (again and again). The one constant throughout these literacy policy morphs was students’ writing with its “tangles of errors and puzzling incompetencies” (Shaughnessy Preface). With the added pressure of the high-stakes (gatekeeping) tests, remediation in the writing classroom became even more highly charged and complex.

This complexity may even be more pronounced at my institution, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where part of the mission statement reads:

[John Jay College] strives to endow students with the skills of critical thinking and effective communication; the perspective and moral judgment that result from liberal studies; the capacity for personal and social growth and creative problem solving that results from the ability to acquire and evaluate information; the ability to navigate advanced technological systems; and the awareness of the diverse cultural, historical, economic, and political forces that shape our society. . . . It serves the community by developing graduates who have the intellectual acuity, moral commitment, and professional competence to confront the challenges of crime, justice, and public safety in a free society. It seeks to inspire both students and faculty, to the highest ideals of citizenship and public service. (John Jay Undergraduate Bulletin 1)

Obviously, as noted in this statement, the college hopes to prepare students for leadership in public positions, but almost all of the skills it “endows” to achieve these goals are fostered in writing classrooms: critical thinking, effective communication, creative problem solving, information technology, and evaluation. In this mission statement, we see that the college’s identity is securely attached to students’ literacy development.

John Jay’s self-representation has recently become even more linked to literacy with its decision to change from a comprehensive college (offering Associate’s, Bachelor’s, and Master’s degrees) to a strictly senior college (where the Associate’s degree will be phased out). After the 1998 remediation policy shift, only those CUNY colleges that grant Associate’s degrees can offer sub-freshman courses; therefore, senior colleges are by University regulation forbidden to offer remedial courses. At a preliminary town hall meeting of my college’s faculty, where we discussed the reasons for sustaining or disbanding our Associate’s Degree Program, faculty and staff offered viable arguments for every side of the debate: the educational opportunities that all students deserved, the better allocation of limited funding, the quality of curriculum provided to students, and the possibility of better prepared students. As someone who remains neutral on whether we keep or relinquish the Associate’s Degree, I did however prompt my colleagues to acknowledge that what we were really discussing were issues of literacy—our students’ abil-

ity to read and write for college-level standards (however broadly defined). I also reminded them that even if we ended the AA degree, student reading and writing difficulties would not magically disappear.

The largest concern I have about Associate's degree students is the quality of their literacy preparation. Many of the students entering as Associate's begin their educational careers in developmental reading and writing courses, and I know that if they are not quickly acculturated to the customs and conventions of college-level writing they will be unlikely to earn Associate's, let alone Bachelor's, degrees. Without improved literacy aptitudes, they cannot pass the high-stakes test that the University has instated. More importantly, they need to gain the literacy wherewithal to achieve the level of writing demanded in future courses. In fact, if readers misunderstood my title to refer to the "arrested development" of students, I've miscommunicated. What needed liberating was the college's approach to addressing student need. In an effort to respond to John Jay students whose literacy skills are identified as developmental, the English Department has implemented a newly devised intensive writing course within the context of current University policies and the particular mission demands of John Jay College. Briefly reviewing a short history of remediation at CUNY and the University policies which affected it, I then describe this new writing course, explain its strategies, rationalize its approach, and examine its successes as well as its continuing challenges.

Out of Uniform: The History and Irony of Testing

At the advent of Open Admissions, each individual CUNY college decided where students would be placed and what types of courses they would provide. In an effort to create a University-wide standard, the central administration requested that an affordable, easily manageable diagnostic test be created that would be administered to all incoming students. The group of University professors who were assigned the task understood how complex the writing process was and the limitations of diagnostic testing, but they likewise wanted to respond to the University's need to assess students' placement efficiently and inexpensively. From its inception, the goal of this test was to place students in courses where their skills and needs could best be accommodated. In most CUNY colleges, this placement depended upon students' scores on the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (CWAT); students passed the test with a score of 8, determined by two holistic readings. Students who received a lower score were placed in courses which were then designated as remediation.

Originally, students took the University-administered entrance exam to decide their placement, but later, beginning in 2000, the ACT exam replaced the CWAT, and its administration was outsourced to the Iowa-based company. The new exam always asks students to take a side on one of two viably justifiable positions and to write a letter to a designated audience, defending their position. For example, students may be asked to write a letter to the governor recommending that state funding should be allotted to either a new prison education program or to a post-prison housing and drug rehabilitation center. Both of the proposed programs could be useful, but students must choose a position and provide logical arguments to support it. Like the earlier CWAT placement test, the ACT usually results in a brief essay stating the writer's position, supported by several persuasive points. This test is scored holistically by two readers. The minimum passing score is 7, rather than the 8 required to pass the CWAT. The letter version of the ACT, of course, begins with "Dear Whoever," and ends with "Yours truly." Although this writing formula may be effective for this particular test-taking task, it does limit students' writerly repertoire, which I will speak to below.

During the early years of Open Admissions, once students were placed at what was considered the appropriate level, the appropriate writing curriculum had to be devised. Most CUNY colleges developed a sub-freshman tier of courses after which students advanced to the core composition courses. Curricula and programs varied from college to college. John Jay students who did not pass the writing entrance exam completed a series of remedial courses—English 099 and English 100. Students in 099 and 100 received no credit for these courses and, as a result, many students had little motivation to complete them, not realizing the implications the courses had on their eligibility to progress to other courses. Not passing the placement test meant that some students who might have been recognized as competent writers by their instructors in 099 and 100 still could not proceed if they did not pass the ACT exam, which was administered again as an exit exam at the end of the course. Often the English 100 course became a holding tank for students who performed poorly on the timed test which, as a result, affected their pre- and co-requisite courses, their financial aid, their prospective graduation times, their attitudes about education, not to mention their sense of self-worth as writers and burgeoning scholars. Finally, University policy stated that students who failed this remediation twice could be expelled from the college. As a result, retention rates often suffered.

Under this "psychometric paradigm" (see Cook-Gumperz) where the exam over-determined the teaching and learning, teachers worked hard

to prepare students for the high-stakes exam because they realized that if students could not pass it and continue on to freshman composition, their aspirations of completing their degrees would not be fulfilled. There was an ingrained irony, however, to this testing/pedagogical opposition. The test designated where students were placed; if they were placed in remedial courses, they normally followed a teaching routine of skills and drills designed to ensure that they would pass the test at the end of the course; often, other processes of critical thinking and writing were relegated to a position of lesser importance, and, as a result, even when students passed the exam, they enrolled in their freshman composition courses *still* underprepared to complete the types of college-level critical thinking and writing expected in that sequence. The direst consequence of this test's monopoly of the mind occurred because students did not see any reason to engage in writing exercises other than those which they felt would help them pass the exam. What students gained in being able to pass the test, they lost in other more useful and applicable thinking and writing processes. As a result, even if teachers were not teaching to the test, students certainly were learning to it.

Although the University expected its students to master the literacy skills for college-level reading and writing, its policies deterred students from accomplishing the academic tasks truly expected of them. The test (which actually says little about literacy sufficiency) distracts students from the work that would exercise and benefit their literacy development. Moreover in contemporary undergraduate education, more types of literacy are increasingly demanded of students: information literacy, computer literacy, critical thinking literacy, interpretive literacy, graphic literacy, research literacy, etc. The sundry names attached to a term once reserved for reading and writing skills underscore just how diligent students need to be to remain on the tracks of higher education; for those students who enter the educational race needing tutelage with the originary two Rs—readin' and 'ritin'—their need to develop their academic skills becomes more immediate and demanding. Students who arrive at college having never fulfilled former literacy expectations are at a double disadvantage because while “[n]ew literacy practices are always added to a culture’s range, old literacy practices rarely or never disappear” (Myers 119). They must hone previously valued literacies (such as reading comprehension and analysis of traditional texts) while also adapting to burgeoning literacies (such as information analysis and synthesis brought on by computer technology). This implication again begs the question: If students do not acquire certain literacy abilities by the time they arrive at the university level, how do we accelerate their learning about literacy to

meet the more demanding learning curve of college and how can newly conceived developmental courses provide that catalyst?

First Respondents: The Newly Revised Course

In an effort to address the literacy needs of John Jay's developmental students as well as the high-stakes test they need to pass, the developmental writing courses have been revised to negotiate the multiple objectives students need to accomplish. Instead of a two-semester sequence in which time seemed never enough (yet never-ending), the two courses have been collapsed into a one-semester course with six classroom contact hours per week, two instructors co-teaching the course, and a required extracurricular tutoring component of six hours per semester. Since literacy is the challenge for these students, issues of literacy become the scholarly topic of the intensive course. Students choose one of the following three themes, which they study throughout the semester: (1) Literacy behind Bars: Prison Education; (2) The Literate Character: Representations of Literacy in Literature; or (3) The University and Literacy: Policy and Politics. Using literacy as a scholarly topic in these courses gives students a content-rich curriculum that simultaneously allows them to self-reflect upon their own challenges of reading and writing. Students are given meaty subjects to consider as they think critically about problems of education in prisons, or the nature of a literary character's literacy, or how University policies affect their own educational opportunities. Furthermore, although CUNY policy stipulates that "remedial" courses cannot be credit bearing, the addition of a content-rich topic justifies giving students three credits. As for any other content course that the college offers and gives credit for, students who are studying the scholarly subject of literacy deserve the accompanying credits.

Literacy as a scholarly topic also gives students ample opportunity to think about how they fit into the literacy conversation or to consider how the characters in the literacy narratives they read gain a place in the world by the acquisition of reading and writing.² For example, students in these courses can muse upon how their abilities to express themselves either imprison or liberate them. They can compare how the Frankenstein monster's acquisition of knowledge helps him locate his position in society with their own situations. They can read and challenge newspaper articles that represent the literacy aptitudes of urban university students (many of these are about CUNY students themselves). In each of these thematic branches, students study the breadth of the literacy topic while self-reflecting in depth upon

what that means to their own literate development. Students investigate the actual issue which is their “problem” while articulating it as an exploration of their own improvement. In sum, the theories of the literacy subject meet the literal practice of reading and writing.

Theoretically, this course derives from the ideas of Mary Louise Pratt and Lev Vygotsky. In “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Pratt defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other [and their ideas],” where processes of “transculturation” occur (496, 500). She states that in the best-case scenarios these contact zones “contrast with ideas of community that underlie much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture that gets done in the academy” (502). In the John Jay course, students begin to understand how their pre-college literacy behaviors and abilities parallel or conflict with those demanded of them in the university. By reading scholarly works about (il)literacy, they revisit the often cliché tropes they know about the value of reading and writing, while also reenvisioning the expert authors’ ideas based upon their own learning experiences. Students confront the dangers of illiteracy in Jonathan Kozol’s “The Human Cost of an Illiterate Society.” They investigate the experiential similarities and differences of diverse authors who describe their literacy acquisition: David Sedaris, Lorene Cary, Malcolm X, Mike Rose. They learn the seemingly obvious, but not so explicit, disadvantages that many illiterate convicts face and the societal options from which they are deprived. All of these literacy topics inform the students’ sense of themselves as literate beings. And, as Robert Brooke has suggested, “[W]riting does not have meaning or value in itself. Rather, human beings assign it value (for the self, for the community) when it helps them position themselves relative to one another in ways which are important to them, when it helps them understand and interact in their community” (5-6).

In this course, Brooke’s and Pratt’s ideas align with those of Vygotsky, whose zone of proximal development considers the “distance between the actual development as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (86). For developmental students whose issues of literacy entangle with issues of academic socialization (and often educational resistance), their literacy growth is often linked with their reading and writing behaviors (or, as I like to think, their literacy misbehaviors). These branches of intensive writing courses create a classroom “contact zone of proximal development,” a learning environment where students’ specific problems of literacy issues are

posed in the reading, in-class exercises, and collaboration they have with their instructor and peers. The “actual development” of students in these courses differs greatly, and their achievements depend on the instructors’ abilities to identify students’ misperceptions and devise ways for students to negotiate their tricky processes of reading and writing and, ultimately, resolve and master them on their own. During this slow and arduous progression, it is often difficult for both students and teachers to pinpoint the actual improvement being made—also because the progression is often accompanied by moments of regression. As Lee Ann Carroll states:

When we judge the individual written texts students produce, we may lose sight of the students themselves as writers struggling with the same problems that all writers, including ourselves, face, and we may forget how many years of experience it takes to learn new strategies. (115)

The writing processes we, as accomplished writers, have mastered, internalized, and naturalized may never have been experienced by our developmental students. This exposure to writing methods (in their eleventh educational hour) does not mean that students cannot learn them, just that they need to be given the opportunities to practice them—both to improve them and, frankly, to screw them up.

To support this zone of proximal development, instructors scaffold their course assignments and exercises to lead students through a series of interrelated exercises. Students move from a personal literacy narrative, to another personal experience essay in which they integrate outside sources, to an “academic” essay using all of their readings to argue a focused idea about literacy. In his 1983 “Remedial Writing Courses,” Mike Rose advised:

... a remedial writing curriculum must fit into the overall context of a university education: students must early on, begin wrestling with academically oriented topics that help them develop into more critical thinkers, that provide them with some of the tools of the examined life, and that, practically, will assist them in the courses they take. (114)

While entering a structured zone that shapes and nurtures their proximal development, students discover their positions and roles in their new literacy community. They begin to recognize themselves as highly literate

beings; this course creates a literacy situation in which they practice new habits of literacy while simultaneously studying what literacy means to a contributing citizen's role in the academic community and, ultimately, in society.

In considering CUNY students, I would add to Rose's statement "... will assist them in the courses they take and the exams they are issued." Our assistance to students demands a two-fold approach: while we certainly do not want to teach to the test, we also cannot ignore it. Amidst the intensive reading and writing these students do for academic purposes, every two weeks teachers give students an in-class exam that replicates the actual test they will take at the end of the semester. During the semester, students take approximately six to seven of these practice exams. Instructors explain the structure of the exam, how it is evaluated, and what constitutes a passing submission. Normally, the first four or five of these exams relate to the readings students have been doing during the semester. The final few address topics which have nothing to do with the course's material, but will prepare students for whatever topic they may be handed at the actual test site.

Obviously, this course exposes students to a huge amount of reading and writing as well as test practice, computer research, and other activities (see the Appendix for the sequence of writing assignments). This abundant workload demands more frequent meeting times between students and teachers. Instead of breaking the course into a two-semester sequence as done previously, this course exposes students to six hours of literacy practice with two separate instructors. Each instructor meets with the same group of students for three hours during the week, engaging in complementary activities. Students may be reading a text in one instructor's session, while in the other they are writing a related response. Or while one teacher assigns a piece of writing, the other may be introducing conventions or strategies that will inform how that assignment is constructed. As a team-taught course, students experience the rhetorical expertise of two writing teachers, who coordinate their efforts to stimulate and evaluate students' work.

This team teaching demands coordination and conversations between the instructors both before, during, and after the semester. Problems have arisen less with the instructors' coordination but more with students' reactions to having multiple instructors. Once when I team-taught an early pilot of this course, I had asked my teaching partner to inform our students to bring their writing assignments to my next weekly session. In that following session when I asked my class to get out these texts, the lack of eye contact in the room alerted me that many of them had arrived without the

necessary draft. When I asked why they had not brought it, they immediately stated that the other instructor had not informed them of my request. Seeing that some of the students actually had the piece of writing and felt squeamish about the excuse, I pulled out my cell phone. I rang my teaching partner, held the phone up to the class, and said, "Say hi to Andi." A nervous "Hello" filled the room. "Hi, Andi. The students have told me that you never asked them to bring the draft of their assignment." Andi quickly retorted, "Absolutely not. I had it written on the board and included it in an e-mail to them." Andi and I later classified this student strategy as the "Mommy-Daddy syndrome," where students tried to play one instructor's words against the other's. (Evidently, in our team-taught course, gender played a prominent role in students' minds.) Luckily, the mobile phone offered the opportunity to foil their crafty efforts. After a short lecture on academic accountability, the students began rewriting their drafts in class. They never again attempted the "Mommy said/Daddy said" strategy. I had to respect their attempt to work the system of this course to their advantage. They were beginning to understand the inner workings of the course and used them to their—in this case—disadvantage.

This course requires a final portfolio, and finishing the compilation of writing assignments is another problem that has consistently cropped up. Students must submit a final portfolio that includes writing that they have completed over the semester along with a final cover letter that describes their literacy progress and challenges during the semester. From the onset, many students thought that they could forego doing the portfolio and merely practice for the exam. In this scenario, students considered that learning-to-the-test was the singular and primary purpose of the course. In a beginning-of-the-semester letter distributed to all students from the program director (presently me), students are informed that a portfolio is required for the course, and, if they do not complete this required compilation of writing, they will not receive an official pass, which allows them to take the end-of-the-semester ACT exam. Instructors also explicitly state this regulation in their syllabi as well. Regardless of how many times this essential piece of information is emphasized, there are always students who feign ignorance. Students, however, who do not complete the final portfolio, are not permitted to take the final exam and thus fail the course. As a way to resolve student selective interpretation of the course regulations, in the upcoming semester each student will need to sign a contract which agrees to these conditions.

Another condition of the course is six hours of tutoring. Throughout

the semester students must attend six sessions (one hour each) of peer tutoring in the college's Writing Center or ESL Resource Center. Both of these centers offer free one-on-one peer tutoring as well as group workshops. Students may attend either type of tutoring to fulfill their supplemental tutoring requirement. After students' visits, both centers send attendance reports to instructors. Those students who do not fulfill their tutoring requirements are not permitted to sit for the final exam. This mandatory tutoring has been one of the greatest difficulties of the course. Students resist devoting the time and effort it takes to attend tutoring sessions (although once students start attending them, they normally return without complaint). In many cases, concessions are made for tutoring requirements. If students complete most of the hours and submit a substantial portfolio, a few missing hours are often overlooked. Yet, normally students who do not attend any tutoring, also are not doing their classroom work and, as a result, their writing improvement suffers both in the assignments as well as the practice tests. In addition to the literacy exposure, students in these courses also need to learn accountability to their schoolwork. For many of the English 100 students, the dos and don'ts of academic customs must be explicitly stated and taught (i.e., time management, direction following, revision techniques, respectful peer critique, and deadline observance). These are not innate skills yet with the highly demanding multi-tasking expectations of English 100, students do "learn" and apply them.³ Again, socialization to academic customs becomes a crucial element for students' success in this course.⁴

In "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key," her Chair's Address to the 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Kathleen Blake Yancey proposes thinking about composition education differently in the new millennium. She states, "Suppose that if instead of focusing on the gatekeeping year, we saw composition education as a *gateway*? Suppose that we enlarged our focus to include *both* moments, gatekeeping and gateway?" (306, emphasis in original). Her figurative gate swings both ways, predominantly in a direction that offers educational access to students whose literacy challenges may be, more often than not, met with a difficult rite of entry. Instead of a gated educational community that is reserved for a privileged group of students, Yancey advocates providing a literacy curriculum that will be key to their educational success. Even if my use of her metaphor is exaggerated, I don't believe a call to heed her advice can be overstated.

Yancey's suggestion nicely frames the conceptual underpinnings of the newly revised John Jay developmental curriculum. This course differs from

regular “remedial” courses in that it introduces students to the many literacy behaviors—not exclusively skills and drills—that will ultimately benefit their college writing. Using literacy as the focus for study, students explore where their literate strengths can enable their still existing challenges. This course ignores neither the critical thinking and composing students need to develop as college students nor the test skills they must possess to enter into the freshman composition sequence. Mary Soliday offers sound advice when she asserts:

Yet remedial English has always been with us in various forms because it has long acted as an ad hoc form of admissions within all types of institutions. Remedial writing was used to stratify students within institutions through the 1940s, and, beginning in the 1920s and accelerating in the 1970s, more markedly to stratify the institutions themselves. I do not question the value of thousands of basic skills programs that may have helped students gain access to the B.A. But I do question the wisdom of using basic skills courses to fulfill institutional commitments and to resolve educational conflicts in a submerged or marginal form. Ultimately, we all need to question remediation’s anomalous status within institutions in order to imagine alternatives to it. (22)

Soliday does not deny that developmental courses are sometimes necessary, but advises that their purpose and implementation should be carefully scrutinized—both pedagogically and politically. John Jay’s new English intensive developmental course has fulfilled institutional commitments to students by offering them writing assignments that enable them to intermix their personal experience with academic discourse as well as providing them the wherewithal to pass the required exam. Under the constraints of University policy, this course offers students the exposure to composing that helps them launch a successful college career.

A Final Note and a Policy-Driven Development

Thus far in the implementation of this intensive developmental course, our efforts have been successful. In the first semester in which we fully implemented the course, most sections had a seventy to ninety percent pass rate for the test required for the students’ progression. For those students who have continued at the college, their academic achievements have been

admirable and sometimes astounding, considering their literacy aptitudes when they entered the University. On an anecdotal note, one student has achieved the dean's list every semester since finishing English 100 in his first semester. Although this one case doesn't prove the validity of the course, it certainly demonstrates that students who begin as "remedial" can progress and succeed in college.

To finish this developmental narrative, my college has decided to eliminate the Associate's degree at John Jay, and, as aforementioned, this change in college identity means that once we gain senior college status, this new English 100 Intensive course will disappear. Students who do not pass the ACT reading and writing entrance exams will be directed to our University's community colleges, where they will be groomed for higher level work. But, frankly, displacing certain students from our college will be no magic wand or pixie dust to make students' literacy difficulties disappear from our campus. On our desks, we will still find essays with uncritical thinking, unconventional writing styles, and "unstandardized" language usage. Removing a selected group of students from the mix of our student body does not remove the problem of student writing difficulties. Furthermore, I am not sure that eliminating a certain student contingent helps to ameliorate the quality of our teaching. Having students who challenge our teaching abilities pushes us to think in more creative and innovative ways about the classroom. I hope that the experience gained in developing this English intensive developmental course will not be lost as we move toward exclusively senior college status. For by creating carefully designed literacy curricula and preparing instructors for the teaching quandaries they may confront, we have encouraged both students and teachers to find insightful pedagogical answers to the student writing challenges that we inevitably encounter in all of our classroom endeavors.

Notes

1. In his dissertation, Tim McCormack writes an extensive and engaging account of the 1998 CUNY Board of Trustees' decision to end CUNY senior colleges' remediation programs. He also chronicles the onslaught of media criticism of CUNY and its students during the 1990s. His detailed record of this history demonstrates the "external pressures of institutional policy-decisions" and how they impact the university writing classroom.

2. For example, the Frankenstein monster does not realize his place in the

world until he lies next to the woodman's shack and learns language and, of course, the next week, reads Milton. For less monstrous narratives, consider Precious in Sapphire's *PUSH*, Malcolm X in "Get a Hold of a Dictionary," or Jimmy Santiago Baca in *A Place to Stand*. In each of these stories, the literacy-gaining character finds a constructive role as a citizen in society.

3. I have to admit that once with a particularly non-responsive group of English 100 students, I lost my cool and announced, "If you are going to continue to remain bovine, you will never succeed at college." "What does 'bovine' mean?" they asked. I could only respond, "MOO." I handed a few students dictionaries to find the meaning, which they then reported to the entire group: vocabulary lesson complete.

4. Many authors have explored the underlying social and personal issues that entering freshmen face during their first year in college. These socialization issues often become most apparent in composition courses because of the normally interactive nature of the course as well as its workload. For other references, see Doug Hunt, Lee Ann Carroll, and Marilyn Sternglass.

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APPENDIX

Assignments for English 100 Intensive

- Students compose a personal narrative that describes a situation in which they found themselves expressing a challenge. (3 – 4 pages + drafts)
- Students write an essay that compares/contrasts their educational experiences to those of an established writer or to the theories of education. (3 – 4 pages + drafts)
- Students research and write an inquiry-based essay that explores an investigative question through the scholarship of outside authors. These outside resources will come from texts read in the course as well as articles students find themselves. (4 – 5 pages + drafts)
- Students write in-class tests throughout the semester that prepare them for the ACT exam that they must pass to advance to English 101. (2 – 3 pages each)
- Students keep a writing process journal that tracks their habits of reading and writing. (approximately 20 pages written throughout the semester)
- Students submit a mid-term evaluation memorandum that records what was discussed during their mid-term conference. This memorandum states what they have completed thus far in the semester, what advice the instructor has given them, what hypothetical letter grade they would assign themselves, and what writing tasks they must complete before the end of the semester.
- Students compose a letter to their English 101 teacher that reflects upon their literate strengths and challenges. They record what they learned in English 100 Intensive as well as what they need to improve in their subsequent writing endeavors. (2 – 3 pages)
- Students compile and submit an end-of-the-semester portfolio of writing which represents their accumulated knowledge and abilities of writing.